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CURRENT PLANNING PRIORITIES IN RURAL VILLAGES IN MALAYSIA

LEARNING FROM THE NEW MALAYSIAN VILLAGE ACTION PLANS

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Abstract The Village Action Plan strategy, initiated in Malaysia in 2007, is a federal government initiative intended to help villages design their own plans to assist development. Initial work to develop the most appropriate ways of encouraging participation in planning with 17 villages in all parts of Malaysia enables identification of local priorities. A further 200 villages are planned to have constructed their action plans by the end of 2009. This paper is based on the analysis of reports from workshops held in the 17 villages in which action plans have been already been prepared by villagers permits the identification of common priorities and preoccupations in a range of localities in East and West Malaysia. The analysis shows the relative importance given by villagers to improving farming output and its sustainability, protecting village social environment and strengthening livelihoods for all village households. Malaysia's rapid economic progress over recent decades poses special challenges in many rural areas. It is valuable, therefore, to identify rural people's priorities, in particular relating to farming activities and to compare this recent Malaysian evidence with that from some other south-east Asian countries as well as south-west China.

Key words: villages, alienation, post-productivism

Résumé : **Priorités dans la planification des villages ruraux en Malaisie — apprenant des nouveaux plans d'action des villages Malaisiens.** La stratégie des Plans d'Action Villageois, commencé en Malaisie en 2007, est une initiative du gouvernement fédéral avec le but d'assister que les villages dessinent leurs propres plans pour aider leur développement. Un projet pour assister 17 villages dans toute la Malaisie identifier leurs propres priorités a permis l'identification d'une méthodologie pour assister ce travail dans 200 villages avant la fin de 2009. Cette présentation est basé sur l'analyse des résultats des premiers 17 ateliers villageois. L'importance donnée par les gens des villages à l'amélioration de l'agriculture pour assurer un bon niveau de productivité soutenable, la protection de l'environnement social du village et la fortification de leurs systèmes de vie. L'amélioration rapide du niveau de vie en Malaisie pendant les dernières années présente un défi formidable dans les zones rurales. Il est donc très important de pouvoir identifier les vraies priorités de villageois, surtout dans les priorités envers la production agricole en comparaison avec le travail plus rentable dans les villes.

Mots clés : villages, aliénation, post-productivisme

INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, the launching of the Village Action Plan by the Prime Minister on 29 January 2009 marks a new phase of rural planning. The Village Action Plan is supposed to be a bottom up approach to involve active participation of village communities in planning and delivery of actions to improve their wellbeing. As mentioned by Moseley (2002), the active involvement of local and rural communities in planning is increasingly emphasized by governments in developed countries. In Malaysia, the efforts began in mid 1990s when the government launched a new philosophy of rural development, giving emphasis on human development. The main programme under this new initiative is the Visionary Village Movement requiring village community to plan and initiate rural development programmes. Early initiatives involved training or capacity building of the rural leadership i.e. the Village Development and Security Committee (JKKK) in the planning and management of the village activities and projects. The approach is relatively new in Malaysia, although the concept of community participation has been emphasized since independence. The Rural Action Plan is a planning document which contains statements about problems and development potential of a village, vision and objectives, and development proposals in the form of projects, and programmes, to solve problems and to achieve the development objectives of the village. The document also has maps and diagrams to support and clarify the proposals together with justifications of proposals, target group, method and timeframe of implementation and cost.

This first part of the paper presents an overview of rural planning in Malaysia, the concept and methodology of rural action plan. The second part presents case studies of rural action planning in 17 initial villages. The final part highlights some of the lessons learned from the initial work of participatory approach in the rural action plan.

OVERVIEW OF RURAL PLANNING IN MALAYSIA

Participatory approach in planning of a village community is something new in Malaysia although the practice of village planning can be traced back to the 1940s during the colonial period. A massive exercise of rural planning took place from the development of resettlement schemes in Malaya during the Emergency Period (in late 1940s and 1950s). The establishment of resettlement schemes, commonly known as “new villages” involved forced resettlement of the population from scattered villages in rural areas, rubber plantations and tin mining regions. The new villages were planned for security reasons and carried out in a rush, to curb communist insurgents from approaching scattered villages for recruits or logistic support (Voon and Khoo, 1986). The resettlement schemes were considered more organized in terms of physical arrangement of buildings and had better infrastructure and facilities compared to traditional villages. The planning and development of New Villages was under military command and thus, no participation was expected from the people.

During the period after independence, rural development started with programmes for the provision of basic infrastructure and facilities and some initial programmes for addressing poverty and land hunger. Given various constraints and shortages, a planning mechanism called the ‘Red Book’ was introduced to plan, coordinate development implementation and receive information from the grassroots with regard to the development of existing rural settlements. The Red Book was basically a district rural development plan manual, containing instructions on how to prepare a rural district plan including the setting up and organisation of the District Rural Development Committee, procedures of plan preparation, sectoral policy to be considered in the preparation of development programmes and projects, costing and responsibility for implementing the plan. The methodology of the Red Book was very effective, the approach brought together top-down and bottom-up planning (Ibrahim Ngah, 2009). In line with this approach of rural development, a structure of district

development machinery was set up such as the Village Development and Security Committee (or JKKK) and the District Rural Development Committee. However, the involvement of rural people was limited since only heads of villages were expected to articulate the needs of the villagers to the district office as input to be incorporated in the plan.

As for the planning of new settlement, in particular the development of new land development schemes under Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) and State Development Corporations, the planning was done by the respective agencies. FELDA, for instance, sought assistance from the Federal Town and Country planning to prepare the physical layout plan for the settlements. The new settlement planning was basically a design exercise done by professionals without participation from the public.

Between 1970 and 1990, rural development was carried out on a massive scale covering a region, designated under Regional Development Authorities (RDAs). Rural planning then produced a regional plan. Regional rural plans under RDAs were basically comprehensive plans covering a package of programmes for the development of agriculture, new settlements, infrastructure and institutions in resource frontier areas such as KEJORA, DARA, JENGKA, KETENGAH and KESEDAR, and Integrated Agriculture Development programmes for existing rural settlements such as in PERDA, KEDA, and KEMUBU. Because of its scale, complexity and the shortage of local expertise, the government engaged foreign consultants to do planning studies and prepare plans for the regions. The planning of such regions did not involve local participation, except in some socio-economic surveys conducted to examine socio-economic conditions of the respective regions and its surrounding areas.

Another aspect of rural planning is the regrouping of Orang Asli people, the aboriginal groups in Peninsular, usually living in forest areas and numbering around 120,000 in 2000. The development of Orang Asli schemes began in 1977 and involved regrouping the Orang Asli into centralized villages within or close to their traditional territory. The schemes include provision of basic facilities such as a primary school, health clinic, housing and some form of income-generating activities such as rubber and palm oil cultivation (Nicolas, 2000). In some schemes the cultivation of crops was carried out together with FELCRA which managed the plantation on a cooperative system. There were 18 regrouping schemes developed for the whole of Peninsular Malaysia involving about 10,000 Orang Asli. Planning of the schemes was done by The Department of Orang Asli Affairs. The planning used a top-down approach although some studies were done to take into account to needs of the community.

THE VILLAGE ACTION PLAN

The Village Action Plan is an initiative under a programme called “Gerakan Daya Wawasan” (Visionary Capability Movement) emphasizing the empowerment of rural people in planning and implementing development projects in their own village. The federal government Institute for Rural Advancement (INFRA) is responsible for training of village leaders such as the Village Development and Security Committee (JKKK) for preparation of village action plan. The earlier phase of training was conducted in a classroom environment where a few members of JKKK in each village were invited to participate in the training programme at the INFRA campus. During the training session, participants were instructed how to prepare village action plan by, for example, the preparation of basic statistics about the village, and the identification of problems and possible solutions. The training was conducted based on a standard module with workshop sessions focusing on how to enter information into the standard templates of problem solving and project planning exercises.

The classroom training approach was found not to be effective since, after several years of training, there were no plans prepared by the JKKK. Among the factors identified by INFRA are the following:

- The people who attended the training programme were not key persons or key members of the JKKK such as the Head of Village/Chairman, Secretary, and those who lead the development portfolio of the JKKK.
- The classroom training was too theoretical and did not relate to real problems of the village.
- Too few people attended the programme and they did not represent all interest groups in the village.

Based on the limitation of the classroom training, INFRA decided to introduce a new approach which incorporates training related to actual plan making and implementation. The training will be carried out at each village and involve various stakeholders in the villages, such as JKKK, entrepreneurs, farmers, women, youth, NGOs, teachers etc. The target number of participants for each village is 40 with the estimated budget of RM5000 (US\$ 1500) for the plan-making stage.

Four stages of the village action plan process include:

- Preliminary work such as informing the village head/JKKK about the programme and gathering basic information about the village.
- Plan making stage.
- Implementation.
- Monitoring and review.

The formulation of village action plans in the initial 17 villages

The initial project involved collaboration with three partners: Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), INFRA and the village communities. UTM was responsible for preparing a module, advice on procedure for plan making and facilitating in some of the workshop sessions. INFRA was responsible for organizing the meeting, facilitating the workshop sessions, providing logistic support, assisting the workshop process and preparing the documentation after the workshop. The community role is to participate in a series of brainstorming sessions for plan making and implementing the plan that they agreed upon. Several visits were made to the villages with regard to plan making and to review progress. In the process of implementation there were many contacts and meetings made between INFRA and JKKK.

Pre-workshop visit

The pre-workshop visit was made to explain to the village head and JKKK how the workshop would be conducted, who would be expected to attend the workshop and other logistic arrangements. The team was also briefed by village head on the background of the village, members of JKKK and activities that they normally organized. We also discussed the venue for the workshop and how the tables and chairs were to be arranged so that it would be suitable for brainstorming sessions and small group discussions.

The workshop process

The workshop was divided into a series of sessions, each taking about two hours and in between the sessions there was a break for tea or lunch. All the workshops in the 17 villages were held during the weekend. We found that the village people were more willing to

organize meetings during Saturday and Sunday when many villagers were at home. There were some amendments to the timing during the actual running of the workshops depending on the progress and situation during the workshops.

During the workshop, all participants were given opportunities to express their views. To reach a consensus on particular aspects of discussions, such as to rank the importance of the village problems and to reach agreement on village vision and objectives, we used the voting system. For example, from the list of problems identified during brainstorming exercise, every participant has to choose the 3 most important problems and then the total votes for each is counted. In this way we found that it took less time to reach consensus or agreement for aspects that have differences in opinions.

The outputs of the workshop

The output of the workshops included a listing of the village problems and potential according to their importance, the statement of vision and objectives, formulation of proposal to solve the problems and proposals to achieve the development objectives. For a few main projects identified, the detailed proposal including the objective and rational of the projects, the target group, elements/components of the project, methods of implementation and costing were also produced. We found that the village people were very familiar to the detailed project planning process because some of them had already been involved in developing proposals for village projects and in implementing the development. Table 1 and 2 shows some of the output from the workshops of the 17 villages. There are variations in problems identified for the 17 villages. Some similarities are in term of development proposals such as physical improvement of the village, and social activities.

The concerns most frequently prioritised by villagers attending the workshops related to land, the alienation of young village people, lack of maintenance to village basic infrastructure, and the shortage of recreational and social facilities. Land is important because some land is no longer farmed because some families have left the village but villagers do not necessarily have access to it, and other unused land needs to be made legally available to village people. These land issues were mentioned in 8 of the 17 villages (47%). These concerns about land also relate to the second concern – the alienation of the young people - and villagers argued that if land were available for them to farm they might feel better able to take a fuller part in village life.

A further concern is in relation to the social environment. Alongside the apparent alienation of young people, is lack of social cohesion, sometimes expressed by a concern concerning falling attendance at the village mosque but also in other ways. In 10 of the 17 communities (59%) one or other of these social issues were highlighted.

Strengthening household livelihoods underlies a range of other priorities that emerge from village workshops. While there is interest in the possibility of more direct marketing of village produce to shorten supply chains and obtain a greater share of the market value, there is also interest in attracting tourists to visit the villages to enjoy the local environment from more than half of the villages.

No explicit mention is made of other forms of livelihood diversification such as obtaining non-agricultural work in nearby cities or industrial areas. Such changes are increasingly discussed in the rural sociology literature as part of the debate about post-productivism and the decoupling of agriculture from many rural household livelihoods which is discussed by various authors in relation to South-East Asia. One recent paper indeed refers to 'rural villages as socially urban spaces' in Malaysia (Thompson 2007). Evidence from informal

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interviews by the authors in many Malaysian villages indicates a growing complexity in the linkages between village people and urban areas. Further research is now needed to determine the extent to which the concerns voiced in workshops to design action plans represent the interests of all households.

Table 1. Problems of concern identified during Village Action Plan Workshops

Problem	Frequency	%
Flood	4	24
Lack of facilities for recreation (sports, playing field)	8	47
Irrigation problems	3	18
Road and infrastructure not well maintained, e.g. holes, no hard surface, drainage	10	59
Street lighting not sufficient	3	18
Lack of social facilities (Post Office, clinic, library, Community Hall)	7	41
No place for garbage disposal; no garbage collection	2	12
Air pollution	1	6
Water supply problems	4	24
No public bus services	2	12
Water pollution (river)	2	12
Need for bridge; road too narrow	5	29
Electricity problem	2	12
Telecommunication/ cell phone no line	2	12
ICT repair/maintenance	1	6
Idle land	3	18
Crops destroyed by wild animal e.g. monkeys, wild boars	3	18
Lack of capital to develop land	3	18
Lack of skills	2	12
Lack of employment opportunities; insufficient income sources for second generation	5	29
Difficulty in marketing village produce, e.g. vegetables, fruit	2	12
No fenced pasture places (<i>padang ragut</i>); animal roam around villages	3	18
No land free for future development (Government land)	8	47
Poverty	1	6
Young not interested in participating in village activities	3	18
Problems related to youth/adolescents such as motorcycle racing	3	18
Drug abuse and theft	4	24
Children safety e. g . crossing road; road safety	2	12
Presence of many foreign workers	1	6
Lack of women participating in economic activities	1	6
No preservation of traditional heritage/culture	1	6
Falling attendance at village mosque	4	24
Lack of participation from educated people	1	6
Problem of getting cooperation among villagers	4	24
No place for cultural activities	1	6
Lack of cooperation	1	6
Slow process of the appointment of Head of MUKIM	1	6
Land alienation problem	2	12

Table 2. Development proposals from village Action Plan Workshops

Development Proposal	Frequency	%
Development of idle land for agriculture	4	24
Establish rural produce collection centre, marketing	2	12
Tourism/ homestay/agro-tourism	11	65
Agriculture project: vegetable gardening, orchards, herbs	5	29
Facilitate development of small industries	11	65
Form cooperative to buy land for agriculture	1	6
Government to provide capital, fertilizer for farmers; seeds	1	12
Skills training e.g. sewing, handicrafts	3	18
Animal farming: for meat or dairy produce	2	12
Producing organic fertilizer	1	6
Aquaculture: fishing	8	47
Allocate pasture area for animal farming	1	6

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Social		
Establish training centre, training programme	3	18
Community voluntary work (<i>Gotong Royong</i>) for social activities; village beautification	8	47
Awareness programme for youth, motivation camp	4	24
Formation of youth club/society	2	12
More regular meeting with village people; family day	3	18
Leadership training	3	18
Poverty eradication programme	1	6
Build a cultural centre	1	6
Physical		
Road and infrastructure improvement	4	24
Development of social facilities (e.g. community hall; sport; children's play ground)	8	47
Create forest recreation area	2	12
Improve irrigation	1	6
Identify garbage disposal site	1	6
Landscaping; village beautification	8	47

Review of progress

We have visited only Peruas village in 2009 to monitor progress of the action plan. Based on a village meeting and a discussion with the head of village and the JKKK, there is clearly some progress with the implementation of the plan. The problem with regard to the mobile phone line has been solved with the construction of a Maxis transmission antenna in the village. People to look into the cleanliness of the recreation area were appointed and they have taken some action such as rubbish collection and putting signboards in the recreation area. The village also received a grant (RM200,000- US\$60,500) from the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development for a tourism project as proposed in the plan. The construction of chalets was in progress during our visit in October 2009.

Some of the proposals could not be carried out, such as the house beautiful competition, sports activities, cultural, and Quran classes due to the problem of manpower and the lack of participation from village population. For example, in Peruas village there are not many young people available due to emigration and organizing sports and cultural activities was very difficult. Many villagers are already occupied with their daily economic activities and other private functions such as marriage ceremonies, religious ritual activities organized by individual households.

In addition, the role of the JKKK in organizing activities, informing and encouraging villagers to participate is also an important factor. From some interviews with village people in August 2009, we found that many village people in Peruas had not been informed about the rural action plan being prepared and they also tended to perceive that any project initiated by the JKKK tended to benefit a few people related to the JKKK. The JKKK, on the other hand, also complained that they have many jobs to perform apart from their routine jobs such as farming. Some of the JKKK also have other permanent jobs as government servants and teachers and they only perform their duty as the JKKK on part-time basis.

Data available to the end of 2009 show that 14 of the 17 villages had received some funding from the federal government to implement a total of 22 projects arising from the village action plans and grants totalled US\$746K and averaged \$3392 per project. Grant financial scrutiny is designed to ensure that money is correctly spent.

Lessons for Sustainable Development

Experience from the initial projects for village action plans in Malaysia has shown that village people have the capability to participate in planning and implementing development projects in their villages according to their needs and aspirations. The knowledge and experience that

is available from the various backgrounds of village people could be easily used in the process of plan making and implementation if properly organized and encouraged. The outcome of the workshops revealed that village people were ready and able to identify a range of development priorities, covering physical, economic and social and institutional dimensions including improving the village management and leadership. This is very much in line with principles of sustainable development.

In term of sustainability in agriculture, village people prioritised diversification of farming and other agriculture activities but land availability including the release of State land to villagers was identified as important. In addition, in many villages, people were keen on venturing into tourism taking advantage of rural resources and also cultural resources and being able to satisfy the increasing demand for rural tourism.

Two major problems in implementation were with regard to human resources: the emigration of young people to work in urban areas and also the limited participation of villagers in the process of project implementation. Measures need to be taken to overcome the problems through programmes to attract more young people to stay in the villages and greater efforts by village leaders to ensure that most households can benefit from new village economic activities. The increase in activities to attract visitors can demonstrate the potential of tourism that can be realised in the villages. Young village people, in particular, could usefully be encouraged to acquire skills that could be used to offer a wider range of services sought by tourists. The Malaysian Homestay Programme has been very successful in encouraging tourists to stay in villages and in 2009 some 227 villages participated (Yahaya 2010). The government could also encourage the implementation of village action plans through partnership with NGOs, education institutions and private sector partners from outside the villages. For example, the mobilization of students from higher education institutions in the country through practical training programmes might help to overcome some of the problems related to labour shortages.

The government agencies such as the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development need to channel more resources to finance projects in the villages, particularly those economic activities that potentially be highly beneficial to a range of households in the villages and also provide training to young people. It is necessary to recognise that there are dangers in the creation of dependence on government funding, and there might be benefits in using federal investment as start-up capital which should be repaid progressively and then re-invested in other village projects.

Conclusion

This participatory approach to development planning at a village level seems to provide a new tool to encourage and empower village people to plan and implement development projects according to their needs and aspirations. The Malaysian federal government launched the village action plan programme in early 2009 as part of a national agenda and more villages are in the pipeline for participating in the programme. This is an important step towards achieving sustainable village communities in the context of the continuing differences in levels of living in urban and rural areas. This approach can allow more lessons to be learned by villagers and government agencies.

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